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Vector plans to manufacture "safer" cigarettes at Roxboro plant

DURHAM, N.C. (AP) - Vector Tobacco hopes to begin manufacturing its so-called "safer" cigarettes by this summer in a former textile plant in Person County, the chairman of Vector's parent company said Thursday.

Bennett LeBow, chairman and chief executive of the Miami-based Vector Group Ltd., said the company is ready to produce the Omni, a cigarette that is chemically treated to reduce certain cancer-causing elements in cigarette smoke.

A second product, Omni Free, is made with the same treatment plus a new type of tobacco genetically engineered to contain virtually no nicotine. It is scheduled to come out in a year.

Vector is negotiating to buy a Crown Crafts textile plant in Roxboro, LeBow said. Crown Crafts has cut its manufacturing work force in half to fewer than 400 workers since it built the plant in 1992, said Alan H. Es, chairman of Person County's Economic Development Commission.

If Vector buys the 174,000-square-foot plant, it will spend several months adapting it to make cigarettes, said Vector spokesman Paul Caminiti. The plant, which would produce menthol, full-flavor and light versions of Omni and Omni Free, could employ as many as 400 workers, LeBow said.

LeBow, whose company also owns Durham-based discount cigarette maker Liggett Group, says the cigarette will save millions of lives.

"It is one of those rare opportunities in business where you can make a lot of money by doing the right thing for society," said LeBow, 63, who quit smoking about 30 years ago. "I'm extremely excited about that."

The Omni cigarettes will feature catalytic technology that reduces polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH) compounds from the smoke. PAHs are considered by many in the health community to be the most severe cancer-causing agents in cigarettes, the company said.

LeBow said he will seek approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to market the cigarettes with two health claims. He wants

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to say the chemically-treated cigarette reduces cancer risk and that the virtually nicotine-free cigarette can be used as an aid to quit smoking.

"We will be working very hard to reach some sort of agreement with FDA," LeBow said.

Industry analysts and health experts say government approval is unlikely.

"None of the medical authorities, to my knowledge, have said, 'If we take out X or Y we have a safe cigarette,'" said John C. Maxwell, an independent tobacco industry analyst.

Jed Rose, a Duke University researcher who was hired by Liggett to test the virtually nicotine-free cigarette, said hardly any of the 60 people in his study were able to quit using the Vector cigarette.

But Rose added that the study was too small to offer definite answers and the cigarette holds promise for those who wish to quit.

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

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